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Missional Models of a Church for Postmoderns in Urban Contexts

Introduction

The main goal of this article is to consider the significance of real Christian discipleship as a missional model in our contemporary world, specifically in urban/postmodern contexts. Of course, because of the enormous scope, the issues involved, and the limitations of time, I will limit this paper and the topics that I can possibly develop. It is beyond the scope of this article to develop the biblical concept of the church and/or to engage in a contemporary ecclesiological analysis and I also assume the basic, biblical teaching on the nature of discipleship—therefore, I will not cover the topics related to it.

While the contemporary Western world is still going through one of the greatest paradigm shifts in its history—the cultural shift from the modern worldview to a postmodern condition (or whatever it might be called in the future)—it continues its move to the city. This reality calls for a re-evaluation of mission models as the church, as the body of Christ, seeks to fulfill its calling to engage in reaching every people group through biblical, yet relevant and meaningful strategies. Within this new context, a vital question remains: what is the role of discipleship in this process? This is a central issue the church in urban areas must address as it seeks new ways to communicate the gospel to secular/postmodern generations.

This paper, therefore, is divided in two main parts: In the first section I position the postmodern condition within the context of urbanization and examine the relationship between these two developing movements.

In the second section, with the biblical discipleship background in mind,¹ I explore selected issues in the relationship between the Christian church, urban mission, and the postmodern outlook. At the end, I present two missional models as illustrations on how the church may approach postmoderns in urban areas.

Urbanization and Postmodernism

At the turn of the century, urbanization as a process—both in its scope and significance—became truly global. While there was tremendous urban growth in Europe and North America in the first half of the twentieth century, after 1950 their urban growth rates began to slow. The urban explosion shifted to the Third World, where the most dramatic urban growth has taken place over the last few decades. Urban historian Samuel Hays asserts:

By the late twentieth century, it has become obvious that we live in an urbanized society, not just in individual cities; in our society, almost every feature of modern life flows from the way in which an agglomeration of cities, coming together from earlier more separate origins, constitutes a new comprehensive social order. (1993:22)

Several factors are responsible for the rapid urban explosion and the emergence of the post-industrial urban period. Among others are the unmatched population growth rate of the past few decades (Palen 2002:285-286), the rural-urban migratory patterns around the globe (Kane & Peterson 1995), the leading edge of the information revolution (Drucker 1999), and especially the phenomenon of globalization, particularly in the less developed countries (Sassen 1999).

From this new reality, particularly in the Western context, come two questions: How does the postmodern condition fit in this picture? And where does it fit? Because of its intrinsic association with the modern era, which in turn is fundamentally connected with the process of urbanization, it becomes appropriate to locate the emergence of the postmodern condition, within the late and current urban context, initially having the modern period as the frame of reference.

Modernity and Urbanization

The modern period, and consequently the modern worldview, had its foundations in the assumption that the structures of the natural and social worlds could be discovered and controlled by reason and science. Through the discovery and development of technologically useful knowledge, it was thought that nature could finally be dominated, leading to social improvements and inevitable progress. New applications of science-based technologies paved the way for the Industrial Revolution and the introduction of processes of mass production and consumption, which led to worldwide urban growth.

According to the modern worldview, however, early modern urban planners held utopian attitudes and a belief in a future in which social

problems could be controlled and humanity liberated from the restrictions associated with scarcity and greed (Beauregard 1989). As a result, Harvey points out that “the pressing need to confront the psychological, sociological, technical, organizational, and political problems of massive urbanization was one of the seed-beds in which modernist movements flourished” (1989:25). Undeniably, modernism was very much an urban phenomenon and vice versa.

Nevertheless, during the first half of the twentieth century the growth of urbanization and the solidification of the modern worldview developed as parallel movements. At the same time incipient forms of the post-modern outlook had already flourished among intellectuals who began to challenge the faith in optimism, progress, and the pursuit of objective knowledge and science, characteristic of the modern worldview.

It seems that the modern paradigm, under which cities developed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, had gone as far as it could go. Modernity has been, under current conditions, unable to effectively deal with urban growth and its demands as the level of city systems has increased and become interconnected into worldwide systems (Robins 1993). It is this apparently “dark” side of modernity to which postmodernism reacts. In this context, worldwide urbanization maintained its strength throughout the last five decades, with two added crucial characteristics: (1) the global integration of urban centers of the post-industrial period, and (2) the rise of postmodernism.

Urbanization, Globalization, and Postmodernism

In order to attract international capital to compete with other urban centers, the processes of urbanization and globalization have become evident facts of contemporary life. Although scholars still seek a clearer understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of the process of making a city truly “global” (Sassen 2000), it is impossible to conceive of globalization without urbanization. Additionally, parallel with (and to a large extent interacting with) these developments is the rise and establishment of the postmodern condition and its intrinsic association with the urban socio-cultural context.

Postmodernism, whatever form its intellectualizing might take, has been fundamentally anticipated in the . . . metropolitan cultures . . . among the electronic signifiers of cinema, television and video, in fashion and youth styles, in all those sounds, images and diverse histories that are daily mixed, recycled and “scratched” together on that giant screen which is the contemporary city. (Chambers 1987:5)

Nonetheless, most scholars who address the issues of urbanization, particularly globalization, agree that even though the postmodern paradigm had its origin as an essentially Western phenomenon, postmodernism and its “byproducts” became a global trend. Consequently, the forces of urbanization, globalization, and postmodernism complement each other in their conceptual aspects in what has been labeled by some authors as the postmodern city (Boyer 1998).

Rather than regarding urbanization as a mere outcome of modernity, it may be equally reasonable to see postmodernity as an outcome of urbanization, and globalization as one of the channels through which postmodern elements are conveyed around the world. For that reason I argue that the centralizing power of urbanization makes the urban context the locus of the postmodern condition. As has been said by an author, “If postmodernism were an artist, her canvas would be the city” (McManus 1999).

Thus, the connection between the establishment of the contemporary postmodern condition and urban development becomes evident. From an urban mission perspective, however, these realities bring immense challenges to the gospel proclamation in postmodern (post-, post-post-) context, which the church cannot simply ignore.

Urban Mission and the Postmodern Condition

Before the issues and missiological implications associated with urban mission models and postmodernism are discussed, it becomes essential to reflect on the purpose of the church in the urban context. Here I briefly address the place and role of the church in urban mission.

Church and Mission

The relationship between church and mission has, for a long time, been one of the most critical missiological issues (Bosch 1991:368). Several significant shifts in missionary thinking have impacted the way the church engages and perceives its mission. During the twentieth century, the world missionary conferences were crucial components to ecclesiological reflections on mission. At the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, the main focus was the lack of missionary engagement by the West, while the relationship between church and mission was hardly addressed. Eighteen years later in 1928, at the Jerusalem meeting of the IMC, for the first time the relationship between church and mission was recognized as intrinsically present and in need of further analysis. Nevertheless, only at the Willingen Conference of 1952 was there a perceptible but subtle move from a church-centered mission to a mission-centered church, with God’s initiative as the foundation of mission (Goodall 1953:188-191). Bosch points out that

"Willingen began to flesh out a new model. It recognized that the church could be neither the starting point nor the goal of mission; . . . the church changes from being the sender to being the one sent" (1991:370).

As a direct result of this missiological shift, mission was now seen as belonging to the Triune God (Kenneson 2002:76; Van Gelder 2000:30); and the church—the apostolic community—was understood to be not the *goal* of mission, but the primary *instrument* in the fulfillment of the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations (Mackay 1953). Therefore, as Guder (1998:4) asserts, "Mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purpose to restore and heal creation;" where the church's call and legacy "is that it is a divinely called and sent community" (Hunsberger 2002:98).

As such, the nature and vocation of the church has to be seen as essentially missional (cf. Blauw 1962). In other words, the church was called into existence for mission, in which the church is the means, not the end, of God's purpose. Therefore, because the church and mission are intrinsically related, a church without mission is as contradictory as a mission without the church (Braaten 1977). In his famous quote, Emil Brunner affirms: "The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission, there is no Church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith" (1965:108). Accordingly, the missiological understanding of the church—together with the ecclesiological understanding of mission—carries profound consequences for the urban mission of the church.

The Church in Urban Mission

Since urbanization has become the new way of life and the new frontier for missions, this current and increasingly reality has disturbed the church, which in many ways has been slow in reacting to the challenges of urbanization. Harvie Conn asks: "How can we recruit personnel for reaching our urban generations when the rural and suburban areas have nurtured their visions of the church?" (1987:17). Nevertheless, on the shoulders of the urban church is the responsibility to carry God's salvific mission to the cities of the world.

Contextual Urban Mission

The local church is sent within the context of a culture and should always be contextual. As the body of Christ, the church is called to engage in discipling the nations which requires an understandable communication of the gospel in every context (1 Cor 12:12-27; Matt 24:14; 28:19). The early church, for instance, followed this calling to engage people where

they were. Intentional or not, the early church was contextual. Snyder asserts, "When we look at the earliest Christian communities, we do not see a group of people alienated from their cultural context, but rather a group rooted in a specific culture" (1983:117). According to this model, the church ought to develop a contextual identification with the culture to which it is sent to serve. In the context of urban mission, "urban churches are a significant part of the body of Christ" (Harper 1999:1), and they must learn to be incarnationally present.

Incarnational Urban Mission

The church engaged in mission should also employ an incarnational church model. Following the example of Christ who was sent, and in obedience came into the world as the one who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), the church must accept the call to fulfill its particular mission in all cultural circumstances. Van Gelder points out that "just as the Word became flesh, so also the church is enfleshed in human cultures as the body of Christ" (2000:119). Describing the incarnational experience of Christ, Perkins asserts that "Jesus is our model. . . . He didn't commute to earth one day a week and shoot back up to heaven. He left His throne and became one of us so that we might see the life of God revealed in Him" (1982:88).

In a fellowship of believers, "where two or three come together" in Christ's name (Matt 18:20), the incarnational characteristic of the church takes form in the unity with the person and purposes of Jesus Christ for his church. A key element of incarnational mission, therefore, is "this identification, of being present with people" (Tiersma 1994:9), as Christ exemplified in his relationship with human beings.

What kind of church should a church in the city be? Robert Linthicum addresses this question by suggesting three possibilities for the urban church: the church *in*, *to*, or *with* the city. In the first, the church perceives itself *in* the city, but does not particularly identify with its community. In the second, the church sees itself as a church *to* the city, but in this case the church decides what is best for its community. The third approach is the church *with* the city, meaning a church that incarnates itself in that particular community (Linthicum 1991b:8-9).

Within this perspective, the church represents the physical presence of Christ and, being enfleshed within a cultural condition, is incarnational in every particular setting to witness and make disciples for God's kingdom. Therefore, urban churches have the prime responsibility of presenting the practical aspects of the incarnational example of Christ, rooted in his unconditional love for city dwellers. With this missiological perspective,

the urban church has the responsibility to make disciples in the different urban socio-cultural contexts, which certainly include those nurtured by the postmodern outlook.

In his first letter to the church of Corinth, Paul wrote: "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you" (1 Cor 9:22-23). In following Paul's example for reaching the unreached, how can the urban church be relevant to the postmodern mind and at the same time maintain its biblical faithfulness in the middle of the contemporary modern-post-modern paradigm shift?

Urban Mission in the Midst of a Paradigm Shift

Communicating the unchanging gospel to a rapidly changing world has always been a difficult task for the church. This difficulty is even more prominent in an urbanized, postmodernizing world where the church has lost its long-enjoyed social position of authority and power. Leonard Sweet points out that "Western Christianity went to sleep in a modern world governed by the gods of reason and observation, but in the past few decades, he adds, it has increasingly been awakened by "a postmodern world open to revelation and hungry for experience" (2000:29).

It is valid to emphasize, however, that the emergence of the postmodern condition does not mean the annihilation of the modern worldview. Ruth Tucker asserts that "modernity is not dead and postmodernism has not taken its place" (2002:16). Bosch, in turn, wisely suggests that "for the most part we are, at the moment, thinking and working in terms of *two* paradigms" (1991:349). Nevertheless, in most cases, urban churches still think of mission in a way still largely rooted in the modern paradigm and have been unable to effectively relate with the postmodern condition. As a result, ineffectiveness will most certainly characterize urban mission if the church fails to understand, in the existence of these overlapping paradigms, how modernity has shaped and postmodernity challenged the mission of the urban church.

Urban Mission: Shaped by the Modern Era

Since most Christian denominations developed within Enlightenment assumptions and those that existed before the Enlightenment have also been deeply affected by these assumptions (McGrath 2001), many urban churches are now struggling to survive in the face of the postmodern challenges. The status of urban mission is now confronted by an emerging culture that identifies the Christian church as a worthless institution, as a profit-making business, or as a group of extremists who do not accept

differences, utterly intolerant of any thought that does not follow the church's own traditions.

The impact of modernity on the church, thus, has had inevitable consequences. The church in many ways has simply followed the course and pace of the modern era. As the world became modern, so did the church. Enlightenment values, such as individualism, dualisms, and scientific empiricism, have for some time been clearly identified in the church (Kimball 2003). Nineteenth-century optimism and belief in progress have further stimulated the growth of these modern values in the Western church.

As a result, the church increasingly lost its uniqueness as a sent missionary community. In modern times, mission became only one of the many facets of the church, not the reason for its existence. Guder notes that "neither the structures nor the theology of our established Western traditional churches is missional" (1998:5). They have been largely shaped by the legacy of modernity. Thus, modernity paved the way for the individualization of the church and its mission.

As a direct result of this approach, "the individualism of modernity has led to a view of evangelism that focuses almost exclusively on the individual" (Murphy 1999:101). The impact of modernity upon urban mission was further felt in the growing Christian dualism that would look for individual conversions in the city, but does not place the same emphasis on relational environments.

Urban Mission: Challenged by the Postmodern Condition

Formed within the walls of the modern worldview, therefore, the church has now been further challenged by the postmodern condition. One of the central reasons postmodernism has confronted the mission of the urban church is that the postmodern ethos exposes and repudiates the modern values that have shaped the church.

On the other hand, the urban church needs the necessary awareness and sensitivity to neither buy uncritically into the postmodern ethos nor continue to be captured in the modern trap. To accept uncritically postmodern concepts is to open the door to syncretism. To disregard the postmodern condition as a real socio-cultural trend is to close the door to developing postmodern generations. Robert Warren suggests that the church needs to be "bi-lingual, able to relate to those who belong to the [modern worldview], as well as to those who live in the new [postmodern condition]" (1995:7). To ignore cultural changes that involve lucid and decisive thinking about its methods and role in an increasingly urban society is too risky for the church. "Christians must," therefore, "engage

contemporary culture if they wish to know how to make the good news of Jesus relevant to people in that culture.” (Tomlinson 2003:19).

The postmodern condition forces the urban church to re-examine its priorities, mission strategy, and applied models. “If we are not willing to do so, we risk becoming isolated from the culture in which we live, inviting stagnation and further decline” (Hudson 2004:16-17).

How will the urban church react in face of the postmodern condition? Will it be stagnant or vibrant? Will it be intentionally contextual and incarnational, or will it only minister from the outside? Will it become, like the apostolic church, a sent community, or will it remain inwardly focused?

Presuming that Christ has already given us a successful model to follow, why not take full advantage of it? Perhaps, it is time to go back to Christ’s mandate (Matt 28:18-20) as the only fruitful alternative. Should not disciple-making be an intentional, active part of every church both with new believers as well as with regular members?

Discipleship Models in Postmodern Contexts

Sadly, the reality seen far more often in churches today, especially in urban contexts, is a remarkably different approach in the process of reaching and accepting “new believers” into a Christian community. Usually there is a brief orientation/training for new members on basic doctrinal teachings and the unique characteristics of that particular church. Then there is the assumption that the new believer will be assimilated into the church. Unfortunately, an intentional and real discipleship process is, in most cases, fully ignored. As Dan Kohn asserts: “What is missed is the in-depth, extensive orientation to being a ‘student of Christ’ in order to be a well-prepared, inspired ‘follower of Christ’. Limited is the ‘classroom’ training, let alone the complete absence of experiential learning, which Christ strongly emphasized with His first disciples. Jesus spent very little time inside temple walls” (2010:12). The result? Non-functional church members and a great many “pew sitters” who attend worship, but very few passionate followers of Jesus Christ who minister during the ordinary days of the week.

George Barna clearly talks about this preoccupying situation regarding ineffectiveness in the discipleship process at the local church level:

Most Christians know that spiritual growth is important, personally beneficial, and expected, but few attend churches that push them to grow or provide the resources necessary to facilitate that growth. Few believers have a relationship that holds them accountable for spiritual development. In the end, it boils down to personal priorities. (2013:54)

How can we overcome these problems? Are there any open doors in forming a real discipleship process among postmoderns?

Postmodern Opportunities for Discipleship in Urban Contexts

In the process of understanding the trends of contemporary society, the church may find new opportunities of disciple-making among postmoderns. Some of the most significant opportunities for reaching them in the urban context are found in their openness to spiritual realities and desire for a community experience.

Openness for Spiritual Experiences

In recent years the Western world has witnessed the emergence of an age in which spirituality has suddenly again become fashionable. This renewed attraction for the supernatural and spiritual things has its own contours. Postmoderns believe there is something beyond what is normally experienced in human life, and this is to be experienced in the spiritual sphere.

Furthermore, postmoderns have a tendency to be spiritual seekers, even though they view institutionalized religion with disdain. In fact, "one of the last places postmoderns expect to be 'spiritual' is the church" (Sweet 2000:29). Nevertheless, the postmodern quest for spirituality looks for something experiential and practical in nature.

Experiential spirituality: One of the major opportunities postmodern-sensitive churches have in dealing with postmoderns is provided by the belief that Jesus Christ, through his Spirit, is real and is active in everyday life. Postmoderns are more likely to accept the Christian faith through real spiritual experiences, which leads to accepting doctrines, rather than through mere intellectual exercise. Through a genuine spirituality church members can share how to be in touch with Jesus in tangible, experiential ways, which will make sense out of their own life experiences.

The importance of experiential spirituality, however, does not imply the rejection of the rational aspects of the gospel. Richardson (2000:47) notes: "Today we need a personal, experiential approach to answering questions and defending our faith that is informed by good philosophy, and good evidence. But we must start with personal experience." In the postmodern condition, Christian apologetics has its value and importance, but it should shift its focus from attempting to convince, to encouraging the postmodern seeker to have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ in an experiential, personal, and practical way.

Practical spirituality: What seems to be a disadvantage to the advancement of urban mission in the postmodern condition may in fact be an

opportunity. Postmoderns who are spiritually minded are looking for a personal interaction with spiritual forces in their quest to find answers to the real problems they face in their daily lives. However, great importance is placed upon the practicability and authenticity of what is presented to them. We should ask ourselves: “Do we really practice what we preach? Are we seeking to live by an unconditional and radical commitment to our beliefs?” We only can share Jesus Christ in a meaningful way if we ourselves have an intimate and significance experience with him.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a great deal of discontinuity between what some churches believe and teach and how these beliefs actually work out in practice. Postmoderns are not necessarily looking for religion, but they are open to an authentic spirituality. Practical spirituality is a powerful bridge over which doctrinal truth can be carried to the postmodern mind.

Search for Community Experiences

Meaningful relationships may be another bridge to the postmodern mind. The individualism of the modern worldview has led to a depreciation of the communal dimension of human life. Postmodernism, on the other hand, emphasizes community as essential to human existence. Communal experiences can give identity to local cultures that were abandoned by the modern worldview.

The issue of community is even more acute in the urban context. In the city, the problem of loneliness and alienation is most striking. The collapse of the relationship between the social and physical space shaped by the forces of urbanization turns urban life into a physically close, yet relationally distant reality. The city cannot be seen only as a place where people live but also a living structure of relationships.

Although urbanization tends in the long term to destabilize traditional community—undermining the basis on which religion can most enthusiastically prosper—in the short term, Steve Bruce asserts, the urban phenomenon “can be associated with an increase in attachment to religious bodies” (2002:35). In other words, the postmodern condition can create a new role for religion in times of rapid socio-cultural change. This will depend on the church’s willingness and expertise to engage in its mission responsibility of reaching postmoderns through authentic communities in the urban context.

The gap between cross-cultural missionaries and the culture intended to be reached can only be bridged by a careful use of communication. In the same way, if the church is to be successful in reaching seculars/postmoderns with the gospel, it is crucial that it understand the postmodern

outlook and some of the principles found in current urban mission models that may be used as examples to be considered.

Practical Examples of Discipleship Processes in Urban Contexts

Here I shift the focus of this paper to practical examples on how the discipleship process can be developed among urban/postmodern people within different contexts. The first example involves the *School of Living* approach currently used in some cities in Germany. The second is the *Link Model* employed by the youth ministry department at the Nova Semente Church in São Paulo, Brazil.

School of Living

The “School of Living”² (SL) or “Life Issues Academy” is a permanent social space developed by some Seventh-day Adventist local churches or initiated by them in Germany. In this model various social or psychological issues are described and solutions are presented in relevant ways, thus allowing people to make personal use and application of the themes offered.

Usually, in a normal gathering, a main topic is offered in a series of presentations. Psycho-educational concepts are used that are compatible with a holistic view of human nature. One of the most important aspects of the SL is that the content is useful to people without any Christian background. Another important premise is that the attendance at the meetings is free. However, if necessary, fees are raised just for handouts. During the process, when the circumstances allow, the presenter makes references to his personal journey with Christ. Often the participants will be informed that they can attend an introductory course on Christian spirituality in order to gain access to additional resources if they wish to do so. Besides a “school of living” or “life issues academy” there exist other permanent social spaces in the local church where people can start to practice Christian spirituality without being a church member, such as prayer sessions, Bible knowledge studies, and so on.

Basic Principles

1. Biblical/theological principles: In the Bible several topics are found which can be applied in the SL approach. The books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are specially used because they deal with life issues presenting practical solutions through wisdom. In the same way the writings of Ellen G. White are also used as a source of spirituality and life skills.

2. Listening principles: People want to listen and to be heard. By

listening to important information people reduce their anxiety and assure themselves that life is meaningful and manageable.

3. Felt-needs principles. If someone talks publically about something that other people care about (individual needs) some people will be interested in personal engagement. Additionally, worldwide psychological problems are on the rise. Social change creates new uncertainties. The teaching of life skills happens less and less in family contexts. Therefore, if relevant and meaningful topics are perceived as felt-needs some people will be interested to join others with similar concerns. Over time a social space may be developed that is owned by the people who attend.

4. Mission principles: The SL approach helps revive the mission of the church. It draws new people to a local church and gets church members involved in serving the community. It becomes a relevant way to build real relationships with unchurched people.

Current Stage and Results

Presentations on secular life issues have helped to “build bridges” with unchurched people who are now looking for new ways to cultivate community around them. Over time connections between the new “secular gathering” on one side and the “traditional spiritual” church on the other side will develop through Christian people who are able to take part in both communities. At the moment the main topics developed, among others, include personality disorders, conflict management, self-esteem, assertiveness, empathy, meaning in an age of meaninglessness, family roots, defense mechanisms, forgiveness, relationship issues, social change, globalization, resilience, depression, anxiety, burnout, humor, understanding of generational challenges, autonomy, aging, dying, and death.

Through the basic steps found in these SL gatherings³ that include (1) the use of wisdom literature from the Bible, (2) stories and personal testimonies, (3) teaching of life skills, and (4) inspiration for life and encouragement to change, the people attending will have had the chance to participate in a kind of “indirect discipleship process” where community is the basic environment, even in a highly postmodern context such as Germany.

A second model is one that comes from the work that has been developed during the past two years by the youth ministry group at the Nova Semente Seventh-day Adventist Church in São Paulo, Brazil.

Link Model

The mission statement/slogan for the Link Model at Nova Semente Seventh-day Adventist Church is, “Intimacy with God, with others, and

with the mission.” This intentional discipleship process motivates participants to work purposefully with other people to help them become more like Christ.

Basic Principles

The fundamental premise of this model is that faith is a journey and the believer must daily choose to become more like Jesus. The Link Model also affirms that the best environment for this process to happen is not as an individualistic process, but in the context of community. This is done through the development of a small group structure where real personal experiences with God are constantly shared. The structure of the Link Model can be described in the following diagram:

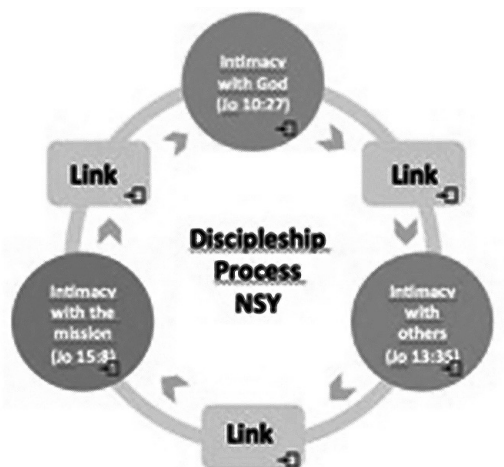


Figure 1. The Link model diagram.

The Link model was created upon two basic pillars: discipleship and mission. At the beginning of the process, Pastor Felipe Tonasso (Nova Semente Youth Pastor) selected six young people and intentionally trained them for eight months. During this time they learned how to live in community, how to experience intimacy with God, with each other, and how to engage in mission. At the end of this incubatory period they were divided in six small groups in the downtown São Paulo area. It was the responsibility of each group leader to invite friends to join a “different kind” of experience in community centered in the stated principles.

After two months of weekly meeting in their homes, the participants were invited to the “Link” where the small groups would meet at Nova

Semente for interaction and to share their experiences in community. These meetings—which are held on Thursday evenings—have proved to be a powerful way to engage those who have already been part of the previous groups as well as those who have gradually been inserted in the process.

Current Stage and Results

So far, the “Link” experience has happened every 6-8 weeks. Using the small group structure has strengthened group life interaction and motivated participants to invite even unchurched friends to join the process. In the past nine months the initial six small groups have multiplied into twenty-three. At the last Link gathering over two hundred and fifty young people were present. One quarter of them were not church members. Actually some were in a church for the first time. What brought them? The intentionality of a discipleship process centered in real intimacy with God, with others, and with a focus on a mission.

The Link model has demonstrated in practical ways that a small group environment is the prime platform for establishing and inspiring a real discipleship process at the local church level. It has also been the channel through which to develop and experience authentic relationships and growing discipleship. Since small groups are designed to meet the deepest relational and learning needs of the congregation this process can help provide the framework for people to be challenged to know God with passion and conviction by learning who they are in Christ so they can develop the trusting faith in Jesus as their Master. This process has helped Nova Semente build a church of authentic community that strives to live according to God’s precepts, that practices being in relational intimacy with God and with his people.

Conclusion

During the late part of the twentieth century the postmodern condition found a safe haven to emerge and expand in the urbanized and globalized context of the contemporary Western world. In this context, the centralizing power of urbanization, added to the pervasive impact of globalization, making the urban context the locus of the postmodern condition.

During the same period there was a missiological shift from a church-centered mission to a mission-centered church. When one places this in the context of urbanization, the local urban church is called, not to be the goal of mission, but the primary agency of mission. As a sent community, the local urban church ought to fulfill the Great Commission—contextually and incarnationally—developing disciple-making models that take spiritual growth seriously.

In the context of a constantly growing urban society a real discipleship process can only be effective where relationships can hold postmoderns accountable for spiritual development. In light of what has been presented above, the following are some practical recommendations. First, a new culture based on relational discipleship must be created in the church. Discipleship cannot be seen as an event or a training seminar that takes place for a few hours once a week within a church building. Second, the church must promote urban mission models that foster continuous experiential learning in the context of community. Third, the church must develop multiple assessment tools to measure church “success,” where discipleship becomes a priority. Counting baptisms is not enough. Fourth, the church must implement theological training (in every Adventist seminary around the world) that places intentional emphasis on discipleship as a process and that promotes relational discipleship opportunities for every student.

Finally, to reach emerging postmodern generations with the gospel, the local urban church must recover its uniqueness and identity as a sent community, recognizing that it is its responsibility to develop discipleship as the only Christian lifestyle in order to—contextually, incarnationally, intentionally and successfully—follow the steps of the Master.

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Notes

¹The first part of this essay is a revision of an earlier paper published in *Encountering God in Life and Mission*, edited by Rudi Maier, 269-283. Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission.

²The School of Living approach presented here was described in a personal interview with Pastor Andreas Erben on May 14, 2014 at the IKU (Institute of Culturally Relevant Communication and Values Education) in Nürtingen, Germany.

³For more information on the School of Living history and approach, see <http://lebensschule.adventist.eu/veranstaltungsorte>



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